METHODS OF DISCOVERING AND CORRECTING SUBTERRANEAN FORMATION INTEGRITY PROBLEMS DURING DRILLING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to methods of discovering, diagnosing and correcting formation integrity problems in successively drilled subterranean well bore intervals.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIOR ART

[0002] In the drilling of wells (for example, oil and gas wells) using the rotary drilling method, drilling fluid is circulated through a drill string and drill bit and then back to the surface by way of the well bore being drilled. The drilling fluid maintains hydrostatic pressure on the subterranean formations through which the well bore is drilled to thereby prevent pressurized formation fluids from entering the well bore and circulates cuttings out of the well bore.

[0003] Once the well bore has been drilled to the desired depth, a string of pipe referred to as casing is positioned in the well bore. A hydraulic cement composition is pumped into the annular space between the walls of the well bore and the casing and allowed to set thereby forming an annular sheath of hardened substantially impermeable cement in the annulus. The cement sheath physically supports and positions the casing in the well bore and bonds the casing to the walls of the well bore whereby undesirable migration of fluids between zones or formations penetrated by the well bore is prevented.

[0004] The subterranean formations into or through which well bores are drilled often contain naturally occurring or drilling induced weak zones having low tensile strengths and/or openings such as fractures, faults and high permeability streaks through which drilling fluid is lost from the well bores or pressurized formation fluids enter the well bores. The weak zones in the well bore have low pressure containment integrity and are subject to failure as a result of the hydrostatic pressure exerted thereon by drilling fluid or other treating fluid such as hydraulic cement slurries. That is, when a well fluid such as drilling fluid or a hydraulic cement slurry is introduced into the well bore, the combination of hydrostatic and friction pressure exerted on the walls of the well bore can exceed the strength of weak zones in the well bore and cause well bore fluid outflows into the formation containing the well bore. When the formation contains induced or natural formation fractures, faults, or the like, well bore fluid outflows and/or pressurized formation fluid inflows, or both, can take place. The inflows and/or outflows make the well unstable. When a well becomes unstable, major problems such as lost circulation and blow-outs can occur which require the drilling operation to be terminated and costly remedial steps to be taken.

[0005] By way of further example, formation sands and shales can be encountered while drilling having unexpected low pressure containment integrity. Thus, at any depth during the drilling or completion of a well bore, the well bore fluid circulating densities and pressures can exceed planned or designed densities and pressures. The excess pressure exerted within the well bore can and often does exceed the subterranean formation pressure containment integrity which causes loss of well bore fluids into the formation. Such loss can lower fluid column heights in the well bore, reduce hydrostatic pressure

below formation pore pressures and cause pressurized formation fluid inflow. When this happens, rig operators are often forced to prematurely set casing or run a drilling liner in the well bore making the overall cost of the well much higher than expected.

[0006] Thus, there are needs for reliable and quick methods of discovering, diagnosing and correcting formation integrity problems in well bores during drilling.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] The present invention provides methods of discovering, diagnosing and correcting formation integrity problems during the drilling of successive subterranean well bore intervals. A method of the invention is comprised of the following steps. A first test is run in the well bore interval to determine if well bore fluid is being lost or if pressurized formation fluid is flowing into the well bore interval. A test is also conducted to determine the pressure containment integrity of the well bore interval. If it is determined that well bore fluid is being lost or pressurized formation fluid is flowing into the well bore interval or if it is determined that the pressure containment integrity is inadequate, or both, a pumpable sealing composition is provided for sealing the drilled well bore interval to prevent well bore fluid loss therefrom, to prevent pressurized formation fluid inflow thereinto and/or to increase the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval. The sealing composition is pumped into the drilled well bore interval to cause the drilled well bore interval to be sealed or the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval to be increased, or both. Thereafter, the next successive well bore interval is drilled, the tests are repeated and the remedial steps are repeated if necessary. The process of drilling a well bore interval, determining the integrity of the well bore interval and conducting remedial steps when necessary is repeated until the well

bore has reached total depth. Thereafter the well bore is completed in the normal manner without encountering additional well bore integrity problems.

[0008] When it is determined that well bore fluid is being lost or pressurized fluid is flowing into a drilled well bore interval or that the pressure containment integrity of the well bore interval is inadequate, well logs and other relevant well bore data are collected in the drilled well bore interval to diagnose the cause and extent of the well bore fluid loss, the pressurized formation fluid inflow or the inadequate pressure integrity containment. In a preferred technique, the collection of the relevant well data in the drilled well bore interval is accomplished in real time and the real time data is transmitted to a location where a specific treatment using a specific pumpable sealing composition is determined. Thereafter, the specific pumpable sealing composition is provided at the well site and the sealing composition is pumped into the drilled well bore interval.

[0009] The objects, features and advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art upon a reading of the description of preferred embodiments which follows.

DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0010] In the drilling of wells, subterranean zones are often encountered which contain high incidences of weak zones, natural fractures, faults, high permeability streaks and the like through which well bore fluid outflows and pressurized formation fluid inflows can take place. As a result, drilling fluid circulation is sometimes lost which requires termination of the drilling operation. In addition to lost circulation, pressurized fluid inflows are often encountered which cause cross-flows or underground blow-outs whereby formation fluids flow into the well bore. These problems which may be

undetectable at the surface often force the discontinuance of drilling operations and the implementation of remedial procedures that are of long duration and high cost.

[0011] A variety of methods and compositions have been developed and used for dealing with the above described problems. Unfortunately those methods and compositions are often unsatisfactory. Even when successful, adequate increases in the pressure containment integrity of the well bore are often not achieved. Prior to the present invention there has not been an effective technique available for discovering, diagnosing and correcting subterranean formation integrity problems of the types described above during the drilling of the well bore.

[0012] In order to prevent the high cost and down time associated with remedial procedures to restore lost circulation or solve other well bore problems, drilling rig operators are often forced to divert from their initial drilling plan. For example, the rig operators are frequently required to prematurely set casing in order to avoid well bore fluid outflows, pressurized formation fluid inflows and pressure containment integrity problems. These measures increase the cost of well construction, increase the time to completion and may also limit the well productivity due to restricted pipe diameters, the inability to reach desired reservoir depths and the like.

[0013] The methods of the present invention allow rig operators to discover, diagnose and correct formation integrity problems in successively drilled subterranean well bore intervals. That is, after drilling each well bore interval having a length in the range of from about 200 feet to about 5,000 feet, the drilling is temporarily stopped while tests are run and well log and other relevant well bore data is collected. If the test results and collected data indicate that one or more problems exist in the drilled well bore interval,

remedial steps are taken to correct the problems after which the next well bore interval is drilled, tested, data collected, etc. This process of well bore interval drilling and discovering, diagnosing, and correcting formation integrity problems in each well bore interval is continued until the total well bore depth is reached. Thereafter, the well bore can be completed and placed on production without the occurrence of problems associated with formation integrity.

[0014] A method of this invention for discovering, disclosing and correcting formation integrity problems in successively drilled subterranean well bore intervals is comprised of the steps of: (a) determining if well bore fluid is being lost from each drilled well bore interval or if pressurized formation fluid is flowing into each well bore interval, or both; (b) determining the pressure containment integrity of each well bore interval; (c) if it is determined that well bore fluid is being lost from a well bore interval or pressurized formation fluid is flowing into the well bore interval, or both, in step (a) or if it is determined that the pressure containment integrity is inadequate in step (b), providing a pumpable sealing composition for sealing the drilled well bore interval to prevent well bore fluid loss therefrom or pressurized formation fluid inflow thereinto or to increase the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval; and (d) pumping the sealing composition into the drilled well bore interval to cause the drilled well bore interval to be sealed or the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval to be increased, or both.

[0015] Before beginning the well bore drilling process, all well log data and other relevant well data relating to previous wells drilled in the area are studied and reviewed to

determine problem areas that may be encountered and possible solutions for correcting the problems upon commencing the drilling of the new well bore.

[0016] After drilling the first well bore interval in accordance with the above described method, drilling is terminated and step (a) is conducted. That is, a test is conducted in the drilled well bore interval to determine if well bore fluid is being lost or if pressurized formation fluid is flowing into the well bore interval, or both. This test can be conducted by circulating a well bore fluid such as the drilling fluid in the well bore through the drilled well bore interval for a period of time sufficient to determine if the quantity of the well bore fluid being circulated decreases due to well bore fluid being lost from the drilled well bore interval or increases due to formation fluid which can be liquid or gas flowing into the well bore interval.

[0017] If the test conducted in accordance with step (a) is negative, the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval is determined in accordance with step (b). That is, a well bore fluid such as drilling fluid in the drilled well bore interval is increased in density or pressurized to an equivalent well bore fluid weight greater than or equal to the maximum hydrostatic pressure and friction pressure level expected to be exerted in the drilled well bore interval to determine if the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval is inadequate. That is, if the well bore fluid in the drilled well bore interval leaks off into the subterranean formation containing the well bore interval at the maximum equivalent well bore fluid weight, the pressure containment integrity of the well bore interval is inadequate. If the tests conducted in steps (a) and (b) are negative, i.e., if it is determined that no well bore fluid is being lost, no formation

into the well bore and the pressure containment integrity is adequate, drilling is resumed and the next well bore interval is drilled.

[0018] If, on the other hand, formation integrity problems are found by conducting steps (a) and (b) in the first well bore interval, steps (c) and (d) are conducted. However, before conducting steps (c) and (d), i.e., before providing the pumpable sealing composition and pumping it into the drilled well bore interval, electronic logs are run and all other relevant well bore data is collected in and relating to the drilled well bore interval. The collected data is analyzed in order to determine the extent of the weak zones and openings in the drilled well bore interval, the type of sealing composition required and the volume of the composition required. Examples of the data that can be collected and used include, but are not limited to, analyzing leak-off test data, electronic log data, formation cuttings, chemical composition analyses, and various simulation models well known to those skilled in the art. In addition to the type and volume of sealing composition required, the analysis determines the sealing composition placement parameters such as rates, pressures, volumes, time periods, densities, sealant properties, etc.

[0019] The sealing composition provided in accordance with step (c) of the method of this invention must seal the drilled well bore interval to prevent well bore fluid loss therefrom or fluid inflow thereinto or increase the pressure containment integrity of the drilled well bore interval, or both.

[0020] An example of a suitable sealing composition that can be used reacts with water in the drilled well bore interval and is basically comprised of oil, a hydratable polymer, an organophillic clay and a water swellable clay. This sealing composition is described in

detail in U.S. Patent No. 6,060,434 issued to Sweatman et al. on May 9, 2000 which is incorporated herein by reference thereto.

[0021] The placement of the above described sealing composition can be controlled in a manner whereby portions of the sealing composition are continuously converted to sealing masses that are successively diverted into permeable portions of the drilled well bore interval until all of the permeable portions are sealed. This is accomplished by pumping the sealing composition through one or more openings at the end of a string of drill pipe into the drilled well bore interval at a flow rate relative to the well bore fluids therein whereby the sealing composition flows through the well bore fluids with a minimum of mixing therewith and whereby portions of the sealing composition are converted to sealing masses as the sealing composition flows through the interval. The sealing masses are successively diverted into and seal the weak zones and other permeable portions of the well bore interval through which well bore fluids are flowing out of the zone thereby allowing the hydrostatic pressure exerted in the interval to increase until all of the permeable outflow portions in the interval are sealed. This method of utilizing a sealing composition is described in detail in U.S. Patent No. 5,913,364 to Sweatman issued on June 22, 1999 which is incorporated herein by reference thereto.

[0022] Another pumpable sealing composition which can be used reacts with oil in the drilled well bore interval and is basically comprised of water, an aqueous rubber latex, an organophillic clay, sodium carbonate and a hydratable polymer. This sealing composition is described in detail in U.S. Patent No. 6,258,757 B1 issued to Sweatman et al. on July 10, 2001 and is also incorporated herein by reference thereto.

[0023] As is well understood by those skilled in the art, a variety of other pumpable sealing compositions can be utilized in accordance with this invention to terminate well bore weak zones and/or openings allowing well bore fluid outflows, pressurized formation fluid inflows, well bore inadequate pressure containment integrity, and the like.

[0024] As will be further understood by those skilled in the art, spacers can be pumped into the drilled well bore interval in front of and/or behind the sealing composition utilized to prevent the sealing composition from reacting and solidifying before it reaches the weak zones and/or openings to be sealed. The spacers can have densities equal to or less than the density of the well fluid and the spacers can be chemically inhibited to prevent formation damage.

[0025] After the sealing composition has been placed in the drilled well bore interval, the well fluid containing sealing composition masses that have not been diverted into weak zones or openings in the formation being sealed is removed from the well bore. Thereafter, the drilled well bore interval can again be tested for pressure containment integrity to insure that the well bore interval was properly sealed. In addition, additional electric log data and other data can be collected to determine if the well bore interval has been satisfactorily sealed. Thereafter, drilling is commenced, another drilled well bore interval is produced and the above described tests and procedures implemented as necessary.

[0026] Another method of this invention for discovering, diagnosing and correcting formation integrity problems in successively drilled subterranean well bore intervals comprises the steps of: (a) drilling a first well bore interval; (b) determining if well bore fluid is being lost from the first well bore interval or if pressurized formation fluid is

flowing into the first well bore interval; (c) determining the pressure containment integrity of the first well bore interval; (d) if it is determined that well bore fluid is being lost from or pressurized formation fluid is flowing into the first well bore interval in step (b) or if it is determined that the pressure containment integrity is inadequate in the first well bore interval in step (c), or both, performing the additional steps of: (1) running well bore logs and collecting other relevant well bore data in the first well bore interval in real time, (2) transmitting all real time data collected to a location where a specific treatment using a specific pumpable sealing composition is determined, (3) providing the specific pumpable sealing composition at the well site, and (4) performing the specific treatment including pumping the sealing composition into the first well bore interval to cause the first well bore interval to be sealed or the pressure containment integrity to be increased, or both; and (e) repeating steps (a), (b), (c) and (d) for each additional well bore interval drilled until the total well bore depth is reached.

[0027] The above described method differs from the method previously described primarily in step (d) which calls for the relevant well bore data to be in real time, transmitting the real time data to a location where a specific treatment using a specific pumpable sealing composition is determined, providing the specific pumpable sealing composition at the well site and performing the specific treatment including pumping the sealing composition into the well bore interval to cause the well bore interval to be sealed or the pressure containment integrity to be increased or both.

[0028] As is well understood by those skilled in the art, oil and gas wells are often drilled at remote onshore well sites and offshore well sites. It is difficult for the personnel at the well site to analyze the data and to determine the specific treatment required using a

specific pumpable sealing composition. In accordance with the method of this invention, the collected data is transmitted in real time to a remote location where the necessary computers and other equipment as well as trained personnel are located. The trained personnel can quickly determine the specific treatment required including placement parameters such as rates, pressures, volumes, time periods, densities, sealing properties and the like. Consequently, a specific treatment using a specific pumpable sealing composition is quickly determined and transmitted to the personnel at the well site so that the proper sealing composition can be quickly provided and the treatment can be carried out.

[0029] Thus the methods of the present invention avoid the various problems encountered by rig operators heretofore. The methods allow formation integrity problems to be discovered, diagnosed and corrected during the drilling of the well bore so that when total depth is achieved, the resulting well bore is devoid of weak zones and openings and has adequate pressure containment integrity to permit well completion procedures to be carried out without the occurrence of costly and time consuming formation integrity problems.

[0030] Thus, the present invention is well adapted to carry out the objects and attain the benefits and advantages mentioned as well as those which are inherent therein. While numerous changes to the methods can be made by those skilled in the art, such changes are encompassed within the spirit of this invention as defined by the appended claims.

[0031] What is claimed is: